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Awakening a Scream of Consciousness: The Critical Group in Action Research

What happens to a university based action research project when the grant monies are taken away? If the group disbands, do the individuals soldier on with a brave, new, continuously evolving vision? If the group stays together, what do they do it for?

I am writing this article some 3 years after an action research project ran its official course. We have just had another successful meeting at the house of one of the group. We have completed a group defined project for the local education authority (LEA) and are evolving a design for the next one. Unlike so many university based action research projects, this one did not die. Why didn't it?

This article looks at how action research affects teachers and what it takes to bring about and sustain significant change. Following a description of action research, it describes and analyzes the evolution of a different group identity from the original, grant-dependent group. It also tries to answer some basic questions about the nature of knowledge group members are developing and the consequent effects on their educational philosophy and practice.

What Is Action Research?

Action research is practitioner-led and implemented research into the practitioner's own practice. It follows a classical pattern of data collection from the classroom and elsewhere, by interview,

observation, and documentation analysis. The data is then analyzed as a whole. This may lead the teacher to an action hypothesis (Elliott, 1984), which involves effecting a change in his or her classroom. Further data is collected relating to that change and the process repeats itself in a Brunerian learning spiral (see Bruner, 1960), as the teacher investigates and comes to understand better what is happening in practice.

Action research is about teachers becoming more acutely aware of what is happening in their classrooms and beyond. They become more aware by developing an unblinking research focus upon their practice. This may be supported in a variety of ways by colleagues or external agents. But to attempt action research in any meaningful and systematic way exposes, rather than reduces, the possibility of conflict for that individual. The conflict may be internal or it may be with others. For many teachers in many institutional settings, it may involve "breaking rank."

Action research tends to empower individuals in their battles to improve their articulation and implementation of educational change. At the very least it can lead to a more public persona for the teacher. Where it differs so often from the experience of taking courses at academic institutions is in its potential for leading not merely to critical thought but to critical thought in action, both in the classroom and in the wider educational community.

What concerns this article is a process of empowerment that relates to the potential for change within the individual's deeper structures of sedi-

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mented knowledge. My experience as a trainer has led me to believe that there are various levels or hierarchies to an individual's structures of knowledge. The deepest and least changeable levels seem to accrete slowly through experience. Rather like a coral reef, "significant" bits are drawn down from the surface of daily events and settle and fuse with these deeper layers. They add to and complement what is already there. They tend not to change it. Thus, as teachers, we gather to ourselves that which confirms our deepest underlying prejudices and attitudes and our educational theory.

The problem we face, as teachers, teacher trainers, or action research facilitators, is how to disturb these deeper layers of calcified experience in order to enable meaningful deep change to take place and new kinds of structure to develop. We might then have the answer to many of the problems associated with bringing about changes in the curriculum.

Carr and Kemmis (1983, p. 44) develop an apparently similar analysis and categorize the levels of knowledge teachers develop about their practice. These categories include folk wisdom, common-sense knowledge, skill knowledge, contextual knowledge, professional knowledge, and educational theory. However, this analysis appears to me to be over-rationalistic since it remains divorced from the personal and does not incorporate those elements of social experience of which the bedrock of the personality is constructed. At the deeper levels there may be no neat differentiation into knowledge categories but a fossil bank record of conglomerated and diverse emotional and intellectual experience.

For change to occur in a meaningful way, this bedrock of calcified experience and understanding needs to be disturbed. Action research rarely takes on profound meaning for its progenitors without destabilization of this deeper level. For many it is a traumatic awakening into a scream of consciousness where suddenly the familiar daily routines of professional practice become discordant symbols of the conflicts that exist between articulated (surface) and unarticulated (deep) levels of knowing. For many in teaching this can be an unresolved conflict that creates stress in professional life. For some the awakening may also signal the end of their professional careers. What is possible is that an action research support group can afford individuals a more gradual and protected examination and destabilization of their internal core. With the

right support, change can occur in a constructive way.

The THIL Project

The action research project referred to previously was called THIL, the Teaching, Handling Information and Learning Project (Sanger, 1989). It ran from 1983 to 1986 and was funded by the British Library and based at the Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, Norwich. Papers related to the form of action research developed within that project have appeared in a variety of journals and books (Sanger, 1986a, 1986b, 1989; Schostak, 1988). The results of our first year's work, following the end of the official project, have been published in the form of a wall poster for interested Norfolk schools and colleges.

What we did was isolate one theme from the original THIL project and develop it in depth. The theme was marking (grading). Most of the time we were financially unsupported, though we did receive funds to pay for a residential weekend to complete the project report. The poster highlights the distilled logic of a marking policy that we hope will seed an action research approach in other teachers, while improving a critical understanding of student assessment.¹

How did this all come about? When the THIL project finished, three members of the group moved on and away. The rest of us met in each other's houses about every 3 weeks. While we talked about education and supported each other, for a while we had no clear sense of direction. Several new members joined the group, however, when we advertised our intention to do action research on marking. Curiously, developing a coherence in our intention produced a coherence within the group. Such coherence was truly group-determined. My original role as academic leader or facilitator of the action research project was now superseded by a member-only role.

That we trusted each other was undoubted. Once we isolated marking as a perennial and mutual problem in our professional levels, we became more educationally incisive and committed. We were also held together by a dominant ambition—that our combined action research efforts would have an effect on our local education authority. We intended to influence policy.

Several other features of the group are also significant. We are mixed gender, mixed working backgrounds, experienced teachers. We make the working evenings convivial by supporting ourselves

with wine and cheese. We have no formal structure, though at times one of the group members will record and feed back statements by other group members. Every point of view is respected and an attempt is made to place it in context and link it to other professional or personal viewpoints.

Within group sessions, individuals have cried and become angry, withdrawn, and hurt. Time is often taken to explain current stresses and emotional or professional difficulties at work or home. But it is the mutual business that draws us back into a group status. And it is through the less direct, purposeful activities of the group that most of the affective and cognitive blocks are sorted out.

Also worth mentioning is the adherence to the task. The group worries away at the evidence—the anecdotes, the notes, the transcripts of classroom talk, the official literature. The evidence is deconstructed from its usual associations. In other words, the evidence is freed from its usual context and treated as though it is entirely novel. It is as if the teachers are adopting an almost Martian viewpoint. Any explanations or insights are admitted and supported at this stage.

For example, a group member postulates that students believe their work is “owned,” not by them but by their teachers, which leads them to disregard comments and grades that are placed on their work by those teachers. Later, during interviews, a large proportion of students corroborate this view and teacher comments and grades become known to the group as “teacher graffiti”! Individuals in the action research group are pushed deep into themselves to ask for the real motivations behind their actions. Unpredictable explanations are sought to explain predictable classroom events. In a holistic way, the group plunges into deep epistemological concerns and emerges seconds later into descriptive accounts of surface behaviors.

For example, at our last meeting before this article was written, we were discussing evidence we had collected from our classrooms concerning how we negotiated aspects of behavior with our students. What transpired was the sudden realization that, for students, the dominant experience of negotiation was through teacher and institutional discipline; through punishment. Students became used to “negotiation” as being part of the teacher’s manipulation to effect control. An attempt to introduce negotiated curricula may therefore founder on its apparent inauthenticity, as a teaching strategy, in the eyes of the student.

Changing Habits

Focusing on marking was a perfect starting task and example for our work. In classrooms it involves practical, habitual hourly activity. Yet the way it is done epitomizes much of what there is to discover in the relationship between a teacher and practice.

Our experience with marking led us to our first major hypothesis regarding unfunded grass roots action research. Our hypothesis was that the focus of group activity should (a) be everyday, rather than exotic or esoteric, with strong, practical manifestations in classroom life; and (b) have the same qualities as a geological core sample, penetrating the various layers of a teacher’s life in classrooms, from the practical to the abstract, from the individual to the institutional, from the professional to the personal; in other words, from surface to deep structure.

It is worth dwelling on this notion of deep structure. The most complex challenge concerning teacher development is that which goes beyond the facile adoption of newly learned surface strategies, such as organizational techniques or work materials, to effect deeply wrought changes to those conceptual premises upon which all habitual practice is built. We can all, to some extent, window dress our teaching to impress onlookers. We can also experiment and recall our innovations and changes, claiming meaningful change has occurred. But, within our practice, at the level of the commonplace, the level of habit, signals are given to students that contradict this picture of change because at some deeper level other premises flourish—unexplained, uninvestigated, and unarticulated.

If we are trying to achieve profound change, whatever we do in action research requires a focus that leads us down to the foundations of practice. Marking is just such an event. It exists as a superficial teaching activity for many teachers. The act of marking may often create a dissonance with a teacher’s declared (or imagined) philosophy. If we do not pursue such everyday events down to foundation level, we will encounter conflicts, often subtle and impressionistic at an affective level, that signal inauthenticity in our attempts to bring about professional change in our practice. Students can often be extraordinarily acute in picking up these signals.

Action research seems most effective when it examines those processes that underlie the material elements of practical classroom work. What we do with curricula, resources, support services, and staff development is a result of the degree to which we

are aware and actively engaged in evolving our "core condition" described above. A resonance should permeate each activity—a resonance built upon a critically active and continuing deliberation on the premises on which all those activities are founded.

Examples abound. In the THIL Project, one teacher (Wood, 1989) saw the contradiction between espousing a child-centered philosophy and children queuing to be marked at her desk. In our marking project, teachers found themselves doing a variety of things that contradicted what they felt were their theories of successful teaching and learning. These included writing on students' books; not offering the chance for student critique of the marking process; and by numerous subtle forms of control when freedom of choice or negotiation were supposedly being offered.

What then enables a teacher to do more than tinker with professional change? The answer seems to lie within the organizational form and activities of the support group. As was pointed out in the THIL papers (Sanger, 1989), a supportive, action research group needs to meet regularly as an alternative "staff room" for its members. Just as disciplines develop their own language or jargon in self-justification and delineation (Foucault, 1970), action research groups need time to develop their own language, codes, and private jokes. Because the THIL group has always represented every level of education, such language development seems to be less private and to have a general applicability, eliminating the worst excesses of elaborated codes. Typical of this group language development are terms such as "disconnected question," "classroom gloss," "agenda," and "social chat." All were terms developed to exactly convey elements of classroom action.

Parallel Investigations

Along with the development of group language, which enables a coherency to develop in conceptualizing focuses for mutual professional concerns, comes the process of parallel implementation of the group's decisions on what to research and how to research it. It is this stimulus of implementing research questions and sharing the similarities and contrasts of the data being generated that adds spice to meetings. The strength of the process is in the realization that problems and barriers to learning are structurally similar wherever and whoever you are teaching. Many of them are part and parcel of institutional life.

The power of triangulation² in these circumstances enables teachers to strengthen their resolve to face their own perceived institutional role of powerlessness and seek to change matters (McHugh, 1968) to create an institutional dialectic. For example, members of the group used the products of group research in order to develop a marking policy for their schools. One member was able to offer practice-grounded critique of an LEA adviser who had come to "raise consciousness" about a pilot appraisal project. Without her interjection the rest of her staff would have accepted passively the adviser's advice.

Members of the group have run pilot research projects within their schools on profiling, classroom observation, and appraisal. This provides the institutions with contributions from staff that are grounded in their current shared practice and the current context in which the institutions operate. As a result there is, for many, the novel notion of "teacher ownership" of curriculum development.

All group members find themselves to be more confidently articulate in policy gatherings within their institutions, even when under the extreme pressure of being a lone critical voice against institutional or departmental rationales. Working on an institutional front as well as offering a model for self-reflection and change in one's own classroom gives a greater sense of control of one's professional destiny.

Being a member of a critical action research support group can be vital to its individuals in this range of activity. Loyalty to the educational principles being hammered out in the group is often greater than to those found within their institutions. When this occurs the dangers of an erosion of action researched principles in the face of competing institutional principles are diminished. The teachers are able to stand for what they believe and thus often create productive educational discourse within their institutions.

Conclusion

An ongoing action research group can be successful when it provides a supportive, critical climate that enables its members to begin to unpick practice. They can take it apart to its basic premises and understand the personal forces at play that underscore so much of their activity within the classroom. This article has thus argued from experience that only by destabilizing their deeper structures of knowing can teachers gain insight into and control over meaningful changes in their practice. Being in a group is almost a paramount re-

quirement if the teacher is to break out of personal epistemologies. The quality and support of the group's joint focus on aspects of classroom life enable the individual to take up the risk and challenge of bringing about professional change. Their joint ventures lead to ownership of the research process, interpersonal epistemologies, the generation of both theoretical and practical knowledge and, often, the capacity to represent minority educational views to the wider institutional community.

Notes

1. Effects on the local system are becoming apparent. The marking poster has been sent by the local education authority to most of its schools. Members of the group are being given consultancy or other "impact roles" within the LEA.
2. Triangulation refers to the cross-referencing of methods of data collection and teacher, student, and observer perceptions.

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